

# Good food and a beautiful house: the Shornells colony

by Andy Brockman

When the fascist forces occupied Zarautz, a coastal town west of San Sebastián, in the autumn of 1936, the three oldest Aldabaldetrecu (known later as Trecu) siblings were lucky. Their father, president of the local co-operative, had managed to escape and was with the army putting his skills as a cabinet maker to use making ammunition boxes and other military paraphernalia and their mother, thanks to a sympathiser in the local police, only faced house arrest rather than anything worse.

Elisabete Trecu (Eli Sánchez as she became) was 11 and in an interview with Natalia Benjamin and myself she recalled vividly some of the difficulties the family faced prior to their decision to allow the children to be evacuated on the *Habana*. "We weren't allowed to speak Basque and Basque was like breathing to us," Eli said. She went on to describe having to hang fascist flags from the balcony of their house and time visits to the dance in the town square so that they left before being forced to sing *Cara al Sol*.

Eventually, having twice faced the midnight knock on the door from soldiers searching for their father, the family found themselves in a requisitioned house in Bilbao thanks to a prisoner exchange conducted in part by the Royal Navy.

The family would not be safe for long. With Bilbao about to fall and having seen refugees from inland, including the bombing of Guernika, Elisabete, Lore and Pirmin Trecu found themselves aboard the *Habana*. "To me it was passages, passages," Eli recalled, "what can you imagine? It was thousands of children. I don't think we even ate."

In the months which followed Eli never forgot what her father had said to her in Bilbao: "Stay together, never part, always stay together whatever happens", an instruction he was to repeat in the autumn of 1937 when as refugees living in Paris, he and their mother were able to visit the Trecu children at their new home in the colony at Shornells in Abbey Wood, south east London.

Shornells was a large country house conference centre owned by the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society. In 1914 the society had housed Belgian refugees and now in May 1937 the RACS informed the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief that it would take 20 Basque children. They duly arrived on Friday 4 June, including, as the local press noted, two pairs of sisters and a brother and two sisters, the Trecus.

Until now Shornells has not been one of the well-known colonies, in spite of the fact that Pirmin Trecu, who became a dancer with



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the Royal Ballet, had been one of the most well known of the *niños vascos*. However thanks to the recollections of Miren Solaberrieta Mendiola in "Recuerdos", Eli's interview and other research, it is moving out of the shadow of the better-known colonies such as Carshalton and Caerleon.

It is now clear that Shornells was one of the longest lasting colonies, with the Trecu children remaining there, apart from a period of evacuation to Canterbury, until

1944, when Eli matriculated from school. It is also unusual in that the girls at Shornells were very quickly enrolled at the local school, St Josephs Convent, a fact which was announced in the local press as early as 11 June 1937. Also associated with Shornells was Mr DR Darling, a Spanish-speaking teacher who had been at Stoneham and whose name crops up in connection with other colonies.

Even so, much more remains to be discovered about Shornells, but Eli's vivid recollections and those of the other residents of Shornells, plus the increasing amount of archive material which is coming to light lend the hope that a longer and more detailed study will be possible in the very near future.

## Stop press

Since this article was researched we have been contacted by Arkaitz Uribe in Spain who is hoping to find out about his grandfather and his grandfather's brother who were at Shornells:

- Iñaki Uribe Zubia, 11 years old in 1937 and his brother...
- Koldo Uribe Zubia, 8 years old.

The boys came from Bilbao and were repatriated to Spain in December 1939.

● If you have any information about the Uribe brothers, Shornells, Mr DR Darling or any of the incidents mentioned in this article please contact Natalia Benjamin or Andy Brockman: [andy.archaeology@virgin.net].

● Andy Brockman is Research Director of the Digging Dad's Army Project. He and Natalia would like to thank Eli and Ramón Sanchez for their kindness and hospitality during the research for this article.



*Eli Sánchez: From Zarautz to Bilbao and from Southampton to south east London.*